

Missing: 2,000 elephants

December 11 2008

Elephants in Zakouma National Park, the last stronghold for the savanna elephants of Central Africa's Sahel region, now hover at about 1,000 animals, down from an estimated 3,000 in 2006. Ivory poachers using automatic weapons have decimated elephant populations – particularly when herds venture seasonally outside of the park.

Civil unrest in has made conservation exceedingly difficult in Chad. Several park guards have been shot and killed in recent years. However, safety conditions have recently improved somewhat and WCS is optimistic that it can increase on-the-ground elephant conservation work in and around Zakouma to protect the remaining population.

"The situation in Zakouma is dire, but there is still time to save the park's remaining elephants provided we can marshal the forces we need to stop poaching," said WCS President and CEO Dr. Steven E. Sanderson. "We need to continue to work closely with Zakouma's dedicated park guards and give them what they need to do their jobs, while our own field staff provide aerial reconnaissance and technical support."

WCS has established a fund to help save Zakouma's surviving elephants. Members of the public can support this critical effort by going to: www.wcs.org/elephants. History has shown that elephants can recover in Zakouma. Until this recent spate in poaching, elephant numbers have rebounded from an estimated 1,100 in 1985 to as many as 3,500 in early 2006.

The Wildlife Conservation Society first sounded the alarm two years ago when WCS researcher and National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence Mike Fay noticed a steep drop in the region's elephant numbers during his "MegaFlyover" of some of Africa's last wild places. Additional research, including radio-collaring and tracking individual animals, revealed that poaching was once again decimating these herds. A WCS pilot and light-aircraft permanently based in Zakouma now provides information to Chad's park service about poaching activities and elephant herd locations. "Zakouma is a last stand for elephants in the Sahel," said Fay. "It's incredibly heartbreaking to stand before a dead elephant missing only its tusks. How can we stand idly by and watch this population continue to get slaughtered because of simple human greed?"

CNN's "Planet in Peril" series—airing on Thursday, December 11th—gives a gripping account of the situation in Zakouma.

Efforts to save the African elephant have come from various levels of government and the international community, including the United States government. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through its African Elephant Conservation Funds has invested more than \$18 million across Africa since 1990. These funds have leveraged an additional \$74 million through conservation organizations such as WCS, private donations, foundations, corporations, and other support.

Several WCS supporters have provided funds to purchase a used Cessna 185, recruit seasoned bush pilot Darren Potgieter, and begin aerial surveillance of the Zakouma landscape to strengthen the efforts of the small band of the government's courageous park rangers. These overflights not only facilitate monitoring elephant numbers in difficult terrain, but have proven to intimidate poachers in the act of stalking and poaching elephants. The flights also boost the morale of the park rangers who work in dangerous conditions with little equipment.

The African elephant is listed on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and has seen a drastic reduction in total population across its range. In the 1900s, approximately 10 million elephants roamed across sub-Saharan Africa while today less than ten percent of that remain in the wild.

Source: Wildlife Conservation Society

Citation: Missing: 2,000 elephants (2008, December 11) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-12-elephants.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--